

# CONTEMPLATING ARTFUL MIGRATION AND COMMUNITY ART EDUCATION EXPERIENCES: *INTER-INTRA*

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## ABSTRACT:

This article explores an evolving experience of shared artistic creation based on lived encounters with immigrant communities throughout Montreal from a personal stance. I will be sharing how this project allowed me to reflect on my dual position as practicing artist and immigrant living in the community, persuading me to challenge my evolving studio practice and question how I navigate my dual identity through the experience of art creation by acknowledging and visually expressing/representing some of the realities and hurdles involved in migrating to a new unknown culture. This article highlights my story as an immigrant co-participant artist by sharing personal art work made for this collective piece in the form of images and sound files, offering my oral story as an entryway into the artwork and the project. The ways in which I interpret, represent and share these stories with wider publics both encourage and require an ongoing and self-reflexive process of contemplation due

to the nature of my specific positionality in relation to it as an artist, educator, immigrant, and more recently, an aspiring researcher.

## BIO:

Arianna Garcia-Fialdini is a visual artist/educator and Doctoral candidate at Concordia University in Montreal, Canada, working predominantly in paint and print media. Her research/studio practice concentrates on translating diverse oral histories of hope and justice movements into multi-modal images that agitate and inspire. Working closely with issues raising awareness on social change and gender violence, she explores the conditions of women, immigrants and refugee claimants while observing and commenting on social realities. Her teaching and studio practice aims to serve as an alternative platform from which to reach and project marginalized voices and stories. Professional webpage: <http://garfiart.com>.

Capturing silhouettes of the urban landscape and making use of visual fragments inspired by diverse migration stories: two aspects of *Inter-Intra* that are an evolving experience of shared artistic creation based on lived encounters with newly arrived immigrant communities throughout Montreal. *Inter-Intra*, as a community art project, explores the city landscape via storytelling and mixed media art processes, and uses portraiture of immigrant citizens to examine the complexities of the migrant experience. Through reciprocal sharing of stories and encounters, the project allows me to reflect on my dual position as practicing artist and immigrant living in the community. It has also urged me to challenge my evolving studio practice and continuously question how I navigate my identity as both immigrant and

artist through the experience of art creation.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, it aims to acknowledge and represent the realities and hurdles shared by a group of newly arrived individuals, through various art making processes, techniques and endeavors: visually expressing the challenges involved in leaving one's country of origin and integrating into a new unknown culture.

Although the larger project focuses on many immigrant stories, this article highlights my story as an immigrant co-participant artist. I share personal art work made for this collective project in the form of images and sound files and I will be offering my oral story as an entryway into the artwork and the project. The ways in which I interpret, represent and share these stories with wider publics both encourage and require an

ongoing and self-reflexive process of contemplation because of my specific positionality in relation to it as an artist, educator, immigrant, and more recently, an aspiring researcher.

## Context

The success and ongoing development of *Inter-Intra* has been facilitated and supported by a small albeit strong artistic/activist subgroup that is presently tied to a larger not-for-profit organization in Montreal, Quebec. This community and volunteer run activist art group was co-created by immigrant workers and intended for them to share stories of dignity and resistance in diverse struggles. This artistic community has embraced my search for solidarity and identity with fellow immigrants through accepting my offering of introductory mixed-media art workshops and story-telling.

As a practicing artist, facilitator and collaborator with this group, my relationship to the community and site involves a deep investment of time and energy that can be difficult and somewhat emotional at times. From an artistic standpoint, there are very real logistical and conceptual challenges to maintaining a healthy equilibrium and constructive tension between the ideas of community collaborators who bravely share their stories as part of the art project and my own artistic vision.

I have made a conscious choice to share my artistic decision-making process with interested co-creators since embarking on this collaborative project. At times, however, this can disrupt my initial artistic idea. Nonetheless, it has consistently offered me reassurance that I am fulfilling the overarching goals and intentions of this community.

## Listening and contemplation within a community art project

Throughout the process of working on this project and in my own collaborative studio exploration and contemplation, I have become increasingly cognizant of the ways in which *Inter-Intra* inadvertently adheres to the structure and approach of research-creation (Vaughan, 2015; SSHRC, 2016). My previous artistic experience with the practices found in this methodology has allowed me to make a strong link between the idea of “listening” and the contemplative artistic practice that is central to the collaborative creation of this artwork. I have noticed, for example, that Maxine Greene’s ideas about challenging dominant systems and discourses of knowing in order to acknowledge and build awareness around lived experiences of others and to shape a more holistic representation of different communities (Greene, 1995), resonate deeply with this project. Greene’s emphasis on listening encourages me to work towards a more mindful and contemplative studio and research practice. This is closely connected to the idea of paying greater attention to the diversified histories that surround us, in order to more earnestly take into account new potential innovative endeavors that could conceivably and ideally enhance our personal characters as learners.

Celeste Snowber (2005) similarly advises that the interchange between listening to others and self-listening is essential in order to expand our approach to artistic inquiry. The underlying idea is that this would in turn support and assist diverse learners/makers in viewing and integrating different ways of being and knowing more holistically as collaborative and evolving artistic creations in themselves. It is this priority on reflection, given both to “listening in the creative process as an artist” (Snowber, 2005, p. 345) and to making stronger links to one’s

life and learning, that resonates most with my own pedagogical background as a practicing artist and emerging researcher.

Another important theory that impacts my emerging system of thought as both artist and emerging researcher is Henk Borgdorff's ideas on "artistic research as a form of knowledge production" (Borgdorff, 2010, p.1). Borgdorff points out that "artistic research seeks not so much to make explicit the knowledge that art is said to produce" but rather "provides a specific articulation of the pre-reflective, non-conceptual content of art," encouraging us to embrace "unfinished thinking" and "thinking in, through and with art" (Borgdorff, 2010, p. 1). This perspective simultaneously asserts and corroborates other forms of arts-based research (Conrad & Sinner, 2015; Snowber, 2016; Vaughan, 2009) and, in this way, strongly could inform the process behind *Inter-Intra*. Contemplation figures into my art practice in terms of how I understand my own migration and imaginative journey. My practice, in turn, allows me to reflect upon the conditions under which I arrived here and make sense of where I've ended up, physically and spiritually (the journey itself). It also gives me insight into how this journey has influenced my identity as an immigrant and impacted my integration into my new surroundings (the destination).

### **A small glimpse into, *Mi historia, My story, Mon histoire*<sup>2</sup>**

As briefly mentioned earlier, in late 2015 I came across a remarkable non-profit organization located in Montreal. At the time, I was actively looking for a volunteering opportunity where I could offer my art making expertise in exchange of becoming part of a new community in the nearby neighborhood where I had recently moved.

To my luck, it became quickly clear to me that this specific organization had a small

sub-group that concentrated on advocating for community activist art, co-created by workers and for workers internationally to share stories of resistance and dignity in struggle through art-making/artful exchanges. As an immigrant, community artist and educator by profession, I committed myself to this wonderful and open-minded community where I was immediately welcomed with open arms and hearts. Fortunately, my artistic history and expertise have been able to continuously aid and contribute in small ways to this organization's visions to attain and artistically express its goals with specific project campaigns; I have also been offering introductory techniques and approaches through various artist talks and workshops on a weekly and bi-weekly basis (Garcia-Fialdini, 2018).

Since 2010, my artistic practice has consisted of indoor and outdoor mural projects, paintings and prints that focus on stories/storytelling and explore socio-political issues aesthetically, allowing me to add my voice to the conversation and raise awareness. Some of these topics include, but are not limited to, supporting human rights, promoting social change and ending gender-based violence. A large part of my work examines and comments on the circumstances and experiences that immigrants, refugee claimants, children and women are subjected to and limited by.

The specific organization I collaborate with is composed of members that have bravely migrated from Latin America, the Caribbean, Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Africa amongst other places, and diverse members hold status in Canada as temporary migrant workers, undocumented citizens and, at times, refugees. Generally speaking, members share in common forced migration under diverse circumstances, leaving behind most if not all of their personal belongings and loved ones, and uncertainty as to when they will be able to return to their



homelands. The diverse members of this community often have little or no art making experience. Nonetheless, in my experience, the members of this community tend to share a strong interest and belief in art's ability to empower, influence and at times even heal disenfranchised communities regardless of language barriers.



One of the courses I was taking at Concordia as part of my PhD program was "Issues in the History of Art Education: Theory and Practice," offered by Dr. Anita Sinner. The course outlined an assignment based on the premise of sharing an artful expression of a personal story in the form of a summative research paper that would bring together theory and practice using the framework of artist / researcher / teacher to identify educational issues that relate to personal experiences in historical, social and/or cultural contexts. Dr. Sinner's guidelines ignited me to think about my ongoing collaboration with the non-for profit organization. The intent of the course assignment was adapted theoretically to my existing community art teaching and making practice.

A number of the group members were similarly inspired, so we decided to follow up and develop the group's next small project, giving a specific and more developed purpose to our weekly/bi-weekly meetings and workshops. I proposed that we collectively discuss the diverse individual

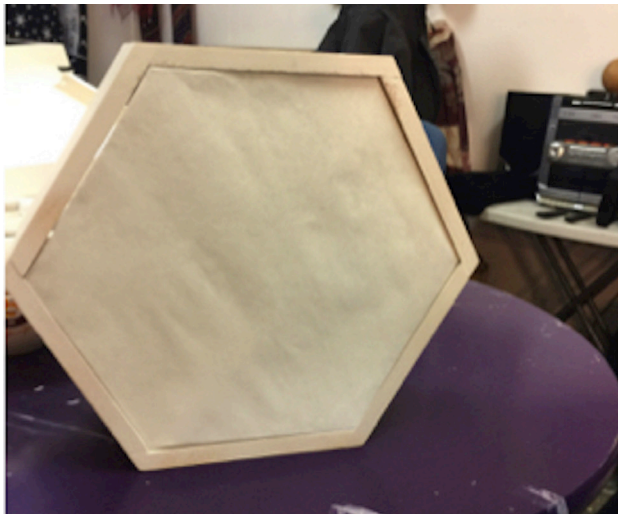
migration stories that brought each one of us to Montreal, our new home. What followed were a series of intimate, emotional and private group meetings full of conversation, tea and baked goods where we each took turns sharing our journeys in arriving to Montreal, as well as the hardships and joys behind making the big decision of turning it into our new living destination. The project organically and beautifully evolved into what we now call *Inter-Intra*.

In order to get the ball rolling I decided to start off by sharing my own migration story, and I brought in a prototype of an image I had made that represented *my* story, the place on the island where my decision to immigrate was made and a power pose that could symbolically suggest how I felt about my decision at the time. I decided to visually and compositionally insert myself strategically in the landscape in order to accurately represent my feelings at the time about the decision I was making. Additionally, I purposely kept the tea bag I sipped on while I shared my story with the group and used it to stain the background of



my image (which later turned into a workshop on how to integrate diverse and

affordable artistic background techniques into a composition). At the same time, I brought in a wooden three-dimensional sculpture in the shape of a hexagon that I built to both frame my image and story and to show the group a different way to frame a visual composition. As a result, this simultaneously turned my wooden vessel into a sound box that was able to encase my story as well as a light box when inserting a small light bulb behind the image (needless to say, a workshop was later offered on making these and other vessels for framing purposes).



My prototype was able to successfully ignite a momentum to *Inter-Intra's* development. To date we have accumulated and completed approximately 15-20 vessels with more to come. For the purposes of this article, I have included my personal vessel encasing my migration story in Spanish, English and French. My life in Montreal is carried out in these three languages that reflect my professional life as well as the one at home. I am originally from Mexico City, and I moved to Canada in 1999; I left for two years in between and then decided to permanently live and migrate to Montreal in 2012. My journey so far has been nothing short of wonderful, emotional and overwhelming. Unlike most members of this community, nonetheless, I was fortunate enough to be able to have my immediate family join me here in

my new life a few years ago, a huge privilege and fortune that I am grateful for each day.



Upon making my final relocation decision, I found myself walking by Notre-Dame-de-Bon-Secours Chapel in the old port of the city. As I looked up at the beautiful architecture and red sky that day, I decided to call Montreal my new home away from home. I have since gone back to photograph the place where I remember making my decision. The power pose I chose for my silhouette composition tries to evoke fear and courage through standing close to the edge of the chapel to suggest a defiant look at what lies ahead.



[Arianna Garcia-Fialdini; \*Mi Historia\* sound file \(2016\)](#)





[Arianna Garcia-Fialdini; \*My Story\* sound file \(2016\)](#)

### Project specifics and a multi-media practice: Story telling, audio and pictorial renderings

My engagement with Inter-Intra contributes to my ongoing investigation of displacement, resilience and identity through visual storytelling. As an artwork, it functions and stands as a quasi-interactive sculptural installation work. The languages captured in the project's audio recordings beyond my own include Arabic, Italian, Portuguese, Ukranian, Mandarin, Persian, Serbian, Hindi, Vietnamese, Russian and Dutch. Each individual wood-cut mono-print is printed on hand-made acid free paper and then dyed in tea, which has been collected from having personal conversations and sharing stories with the specific individual whose migration story is represented. After introducing the group to my personal story, creative process and prototype, each participant was encouraged to physically walk with me to the exact site on Montreal island where they contemplated and

decided to make the city their new living environment. When we arrived at this location, I would photograph the view and later transform it into a silhouette landscape woodcut print. As I did in my art piece, the storytellers were then asked to choose a pose and use body language to visually embody how they felt about their decision to migrate at the time. These portraits were also photographed and later incorporated into each landscape silhouette woodprint.



[Arianna Garcia-Fialdini; \*Mon Histoire\* sound file \(2016\)](#)

The aesthetic decision to include silhouettes of the participants was collaboratively decided in order to fully illustrate memory, absence and trace by suggesting a symbolic and valuable mark or trace that was left on both the landscape and the storytellers' recollection of something past.<sup>3</sup>

The final important component of the project was deciding on the shape and format of the container that would encase each person's recordings and script. A group of participants gathered on numerous different occasions to brainstorm different ideas and eventually settled on a hexagon. The reasoning behind this choice was that hexagons, as balanced multi-sided figures, are seen to represent harmonious interactions, equilibrium and co-existence. All of these concepts can be equally applied to *Inter-Intra's* goals as a

collaborative project, designed to foster community, much like bees in a hive do. It is worth mentioning that the majority of those who shared stories with me and inspired the *Inter-Intra* project reported not having access to a consistent support system of any kind while making their migration decision and upon arrival in Montreal, making this symbol of community all the more relevant.



By the same token, the hexagon is personally meaningful to me as a metaphor for exchange and solidarity in my personal approach and view towards art making. I continuously aim to foster and cherish the exchanges that are made possible in collectives and collaborations such as this one. This kind of engagement mindfully and vigorously encourages a reciprocal interaction amongst co-creators; it requires continuous conversational negotiation and active listening, which, although challenging at times, is ultimately rewarding and encourages giving and receiving (Snowber, 2010) throughout the journey.

### Insights and thoughts for the future

Many of the stories I have come in contact with over the development of *Inter-Intra* have been difficult for collaborators,

including me, to share and to hear. As I reflect, one of the most valuable lessons I have learnt from this ongoing creative collaboration has been that narratives help people make sense of difficult experiences, and stories provide insight into people's conceptualizations of the world. This includes understandings of identity and integration in new contexts and settings, cultures, communities and even realities. As Alessandro Portelli (1991) reminds us, "storytelling is a natural part of the human experience" (Portelli, 1991, p. 50).

Throughout the process of being witnessed when sharing my story and given the myriad functions of storytelling, I am continuously learning that the ways in which immigrant newcomers tell stories about difficult experiences can and does reveal relational and cultural qualities, sensibilities and struggles. One of *Inter-Intra's* main goals is to focus on how a relational context relates to sense-making behaviors as immigrants recount stories of their difficult migration experiences through oral history and art-making. This kind of collaborative art-making helps to fill gaps in our current knowledge base of what it means to be an immigrant from a particular social class in a given time and place. There are numerous newcomer experiences that have not yet been represented, and which could be better understood by sharing stories of detainees, individuals affected by labor exploitation and other migrants in vulnerable situations, for example. In this way, previously excluded groups can share their valuable knowledge, by providing rich glimpses of the different contemplative processes pertaining to identity struggles and the challenges encountered when integrating into a new culture.

*Inter-Intra's* capacity to merge aesthetic components with storytelling has served as an important way of understanding memory construction as it is actually happening. Furthermore, this collaboration has an



ability to tap into the intersection of personal experience, historical circumstance and cultural frame. In the creative work that *Inter-Intra* enables, the main objective is to reveal problems stemming from systems of oppression and inequity.

Throughout the making and evolution of *Inter-Intra*, I have contemplated the stories shared about difficult truths of displacement, injustice, persecution, discrimination, detention and inequality. Listening to these stories repeatedly has helped bridge gaps in my understanding and guide me through my own contemplative and self-reflective migration and identity process. Narratives convey emotion, beliefs, life experience, values, and more that people can relate to. As a result, *Inter-Intra* intends to share difficult stories with the objective of challenging people's understanding of the world and realities around them through deep and active listening. In addition, this objective intends to assist in creating a supportive ground with the hope of starting a dialogue from which organizing and activist action can spring forth. Participants sharing their difficult accounts of forced migration, detention and challenges pertaining to integration can perhaps catalyze people to challenge the broader societal narrative on this issue, or at least offer an alternative understanding of a situation.

Throughout this experience of telling my story and creating my art piece, I learnt that, as an artist, I must learn to listen with precision and attentiveness that is far more rigorous and nuanced than one would typically use in daily life. This led me to questioning previously held ideas and my understanding of social reality by making me more aware of the potential and the power that contemplative and self-reflective mindful practices hold. I feel that this experience has pushed me to further understand that we must train our minds and ears to hear the stories of others—not

just the words, but also the meaning, the emotion and the silence—and to listen to the narrator and to ourselves. This process can involve questioning previously held ideas, concepts and categories that frame our understanding of social reality. In this way, the entire collaborative process has the potential to be transformational for all involved. This was in fact the case for me from the perspective and the privilege involved in being a collaborative artist, developing researcher and community educator. As *Inter-Intra* keeps developing, we as a group of collaborators hope the project will continue to effectively use mixed media arts and storytelling to position immigrants and refugees not simply as victims telling their stories of survival, but as educators, theorists, analysts, and social change agents who overtly demand accountability, responsibility, and responsiveness from viewers. We aim to shift the perspective of audiences, by representing these marginalized groups as knowledge holders rather than objects of pity (Hesse-Biber, 2010). As Marie-Jolie Rwigema (2015) suggests, “testimony will be most effective in creating change if survivors direct the uses to which their testimonies are put. In the very instance of claiming voice and authority, a colonial relationship is unsettled: their position as victim is transformed, and the process of social change really begins” (Rwigema, 2015, p. 100).

From my perspective, this ongoing community art project continues to accomplished this; my experience working within this community has been deeply humbling and has revealed the importance of staying open to different ways of knowing, sharing and making sense of difficult stories and events.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup>I write this article solely from my position as a practicing artist and art teacher within the community.

<sup>2</sup>Images and sound links are included in the text as a concurrent visual/audio narrative of the creative process: from community building through art workshops to drinking tea, to creating the wooden vessels to visiting Notre-Dame-de-Bon-Secours Chapel in Old Port, Montreal, to the completed art installed in the gallery with sound. All photographs are taken by Arianna Garcia-Fialdini (2016-17) in Montreal, Quebec, Canada.

<sup>3</sup>After the first 10 hexagon vessels were completed and their respective stories collected (and approved by each storyteller), a group of 10 participants worked collaboratively on a script intended to capture a more general and shared overview of the experience of migration to Canada based on the collection of individual narratives. The group decided unanimously that making the life-altering choice to emigrate was itself the biggest challenge, a sentiment which is captured in a final collaborative script.

Once the script was complete, each participant chose a different sentence or two from the script, and translated and recorded this excerpt independently in their native language. At a later date, each participant went back to record the entire script in their language of origin; this set of 10 audio clips is currently housed in one of the hexagons, and it encases all 10 different passages combined into 1 recording read by different participants in different languages. Ten other hexagons (and growing) house the same reading of this script in different languages. Overall, *Inter-Intra's* goal continues to be to help depict at least a portion of the abundance of cultures and ethnicities that inhabit Montreal and hold it as a new home and community.

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